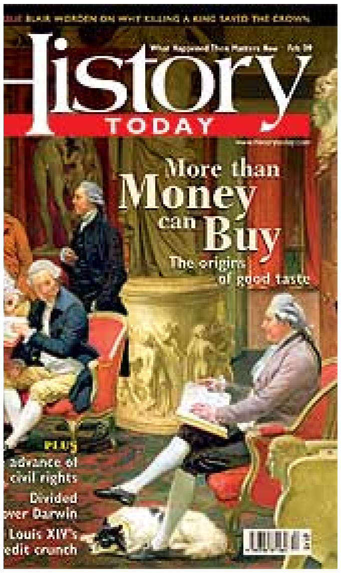

To Buy or Not to Buy: The Origins of Good Taste

During the 17th century, Britain witnessed the birth of a consumer society. But, as the number of possessions grew, so did the concept of ‘taste’, a subtle and elusive yardstick by which people advertised their social position and sensibilities. Keith Thomas looks at how the pursuit of taste encouraged, as it still does, competition and conformity.

In modern times, there is nothing which more exactly defines social differences than personal taste, whether in food or music or wallpaper or the choice of children’s names. The choices that people make in these areas of life may seem spontaneous and genuine, but, without any apparent pressure or coercion, they usually conform to class lines. The possessions which we place in our living spaces and the way we decorate those spaces instantly reveal our sensibilities, our preoccupations, and our social milieux. That is why they will evoke the admiration of some observers and the disdain of others. This state of affairs was already in evidence in the early modern period.

By then domestic possessions were already beginning to take on this function of expressing not just their owners’ social position, but also their personal interests. The 16th-century Italian writer Pietro Aretino believed that one could tell someone’s character from his dwelling; and his claim was repeated by Roger North in 1698: ‘The centrality of the house and its furnishings to the self-definition of its inhabitants’, so conspicuous a feature of modern British middle-class life, was fully evident in 18th-century England. The way in which the domestic interior was decorated and the nature of the possessions displayed within it made a powerful statement about their owner.

Possessions were symbols of refinement and politeness. They helped to define individual identity. They even shaped their owners’ physical deportment and behaviour, for knives and forks, cups and teapots, fragile porcelain and increasingly delicate furniture imposed a distinctively mannered way of eating, drinking, moving and sitting. In this way the consumption of goods created social differences as well as expressing them.

The process was assisted by the rise of the idea of taste. ‘Taste’ is a term which first acquired prominence in England in the later 17th century. As goods multiplied, it became a central concept of aesthetic theory and an important form of cultural differentiation. As a contemporary noted in 1633, ‘great folks’ always had a tendency to ‘think nothing of that which is common and ordinary people may easily come by’. Taste involved transcending mere financial criteria when assessing the value of goods, introducing instead a subtler and more elusive yardstick.

It implied a capacity for discrimination of the kind shown in 1606 by the wine connoisseur Captain Dawtrey, who, ‘taking the glass in his hand, held it up awhile betwixt him and the window, as to consider the colour; and then putting it to his nose he seemed to take comfort in the odour of the same’. It required the ability to choose the best out of a wide range of functionally indistinguishable options, like the 50 different patterns of wallpaper that on one occasion in 1752 confronted the poet William

Shenstone. The essayist Joseph Addison compared a person who had true taste in literary matters with the man who could identify each of ten different kinds of tea or any combination of them.

The ways in which the later Stuart and Hanoverian elite spent their money and their leisure show just how vital a reputation for taste had become. The replacement of vernacular architecture by classical, the interior decoration of houses, the laying-out of grounds, the appreciation of letters and the fine arts, all bore testimony to the centrality of taste as an ingredient of politeness and a principle of social distinction. For, despite its aesthetic and philosophical overtones, the concept of taste was a profoundly social one.

Taste was notoriously a quality which the vulgar lacked, for they were without the necessary education and experience, whereas connoisseurs were cultivated, well travelled and 'conversant with the better sort of people'. 'Those who depend for food on bodily labour', ruled the critic Lord Kames in 1762, 'are totally devoid of taste'. The middle-class inhabitants of the London suburbs were scorned by their social superiors for their bad taste, manifested in the embarrassingly derivative style of their houses and gardens. Taste was the prerogative of the 'polite'. It was a faculty which required education, foreign travel and close conformity to the standard set by an elite minority. In Samuel Johnson's words, 'a few, a very few, commonly constitute the taste of the time' (1754).

In France, the rules of good taste emanated from the royal court, but in England they were disseminated by an aristocratic network. Some gentlemen were leaders of taste, connoisseurs and amateur architects. But many had to buy advice from others if they were to choose correctly from the artefacts on offer. Great magnates had always needed experts to help them with their legal and financial affairs. Now they needed experts on taste. To furnish their houses, choose their pictures and books, lay out their grounds and make their other acts of discrimination, they became dependent upon an army of middle-class professionals: architects, gardeners, cooks, artists, literary critics, cabinet-makers and 'upholders'.

The landscape gardener Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (c.1716-83) was the son of a small Northumberland yeoman, but he removed mounts, knots and avenues from aristocratic gardens with the same autocratic finality as that with which Beau Nash (ex-Carmarthen grammar school) had removed the Duchess of Queensberry's apron in the assembly rooms at Bath on the grounds that it was a garment fit only for servants.

The competition thus shifted away from the conspicuous display of opulence to a more restrained demonstration of elegance, refinement and fastidious discrimination. 'One may know a gentlewoman almost as well by seeing her choose a mantua or a ribbon, as by going to Garter or Clarenceux [the heralds],' wrote Jeremy Collier in 1722. The ownership of culturally esteemed objects became a symbol of status; and the claim to superior sensibilities, defined as the capacity to feel pain at what causes no pain to others, emerged, in Jeremy Bentham's words, as 'a mark of ... belonging to the ruling few'. The purchasing power of the middling and lower classes might rise, but the elite could hold on to its monopoly of cultural capital by asserting that wealth was not enough.

Meanwhile, the consumption of new goods was unleashing a torrent of contemporary criticism. From the 16th century onwards, there were denunciations of 'immoderate purchasings', 'unlawful spending and consuming', and what one Protestant divine called 'the inordinate and unsatiable desire of having'. Moralists pointed to the waste of resources which could have been better employed in relieving the poor; to the adverse consequences for the balance of trade of the import of foreign commodities; and to the ruinous effects of self-indulgence upon an individual's health and finances.

They attacked 'wasters' and 'spenders' and were contemptuous of what they called 'superfluities', 'needless toys', 'vain trifles', 'fantasies', 'new fangles' and 'trumpery trash'. Adam Smith was in this tradition when he said that it was the desire of great lords for 'frivolous and useless' objects which brought down the feudal system: they bartered their authority 'for the gratification of the most childish, the meanest and the most sordid of all vanities'. Luxuries were 'contemptible and trifling', 'trinkets and baubles, fitter to be the play-things of children than the serious pursuits of men'.

Distaste for frivolities was reinforced by the classical notion that luxury weakened the state, undermined civic virtue and led eventually to despotism. The 'civic humanist' belief was that comfortable living had an enervating effect, sapping the martial spirit and reducing military effectiveness; the very word 'luxury' had connotations of excessive fleshly indulgence. Republican virtue required frugality, whereas abundance produced 'effeminacy'; and the lure of private comforts distracted citizens from a commitment to public service.

In 1757, when the hapless Admiral John Byng was shot for failing to recover Minorca from the French, the caricaturists chose to represent his ineffectiveness by portraying him surrounded by his collection of porcelain. As late as 1876, at the opening of the chapel of Keble College, Oxford, the Marquess of Salisbury praised the new college's distinctive commitment to a frugal style of living, declaring that 'luxury' was sapping the 'very fibre and manliness' of the nation.

Similar sentiments had been expressed in Tudor times. The schoolmaster William Horman warned in 1519 that 'nice arras' and 'newfangled garments' made men womanly. William Tyndale, who translated the Bible into English during the early 16th century, thought that eating 'wanton' delicacies had so effeminised them 'that there remaineth no more tokens of a man than their beards'. The Elizabethan arch-bishop Matthew Parker complained that, in the reign of Henry VIII, Cardinal Wolsey had ruined the clergy by wearing silk and thus introducing them to 'the Asiatic luxury'; while the physician John Caius lamented that people were now so 'nice' at table that 'the old manly hardness, stout courage and painfulness of England' was 'utterly driven away'. In 1549 one of the speakers in *A Discourse of the Commonweal* noted that 'like excesses, as well in apparel, as in fare, were used in Rome a little before the decline of the Empire, so as wise men have thought it was the occasion of the decay thereof'.

Throughout the early modern period, commentators repeatedly harked back to 'the plainness and hardness of the people of old', contrasting the military vigour of 'our plain forefathers' with the soft and luxurious habits of their descendants. The exact location of this age of primitive simplicity was variously put at any point between the Old Testament patriarchs and the reign of Queen Anne, but its virile austerity remained constant. It was asserted that effeminacy was generated by the new objects of expenditure, from coaches, which robbed men of their riding skills, to tea, which emasculated them as they sat sipping in female company. This objection to 'foreign, effeminate and superfluous commodities' was not just a classical theme: it reflected the central role of women in the purchase of objects for domestic consumption and the association of the new goods with domesticity and an unmilitary style of life.

'Diminish not your stocks for your wife's pleasure,' warned Edmund Dudley in 1509. Married women were thought particularly responsible for stimulating competitive expenditure: in the mid-16th century, on jewellery, trinkets and 'dainty meat'; in Jacobean times, on sugary foodstuffs and the London season; in the 18th century, on tea-drinking and its accompaniments, elegant tables and porcelain bowls and teapots; and, in all periods, on clothes. As the proverb had it, 'dear bought and far fetched' were 'dainties for ladies'.

At the beginning of the 18th century, the London physician and philosopher Bernard Mandeville believed that 'the variety of work that is perform'd, and the number of hands employ'd to gratify the fickleness and luxury of women' was 'prodigious'. Shops were the mecca of leisured urban women; and it was common to accuse ambitious wives of running up unnecessary shopping bills at their husbands' expense. Wives were also said to egg on their husbands to further extravagances. In the mid-17th century, it was 'thro' the importunity of his wife' that the Hertfordshire gentleman Arthur Poulter began to build 'a very fair house of brick', which he never lived to complete; and in Restoration Oxford, it was allegedly the Warden of Merton's wife who forced him to put the college to 'unnecessary charges and very frivolous expenses', including a large looking-glass and new furniture for the Lodgings, because the old furniture was 'out of fashion'.

For Richard Baxter the concern to beautify rooms was simply 'feminine trifling'. In the 1690s Roger North wrote that:

The whole employ of the sex [women] is a kind of trade in emulation. They see nothing which another hath, but they have a mind to the same, if not a better of like kind. All these setting[s]-out of rooms, closets, etc., have this secret behind the cabinets and corner shelves: 'I am here to outdo somebody ... 'Go with them to china houses and shops, and there all the faculties of the soul are exerted, and intent upon the calculat[ion] of more or less in prettiness: 'This is pretty, that more pretty, but another pretty *beyond all.' ... But the truth at bottom is, 'This will appear better than what another lady had, ergo it is prettier'; and so the comparison is not of the things themselves, but as they are connect[ed] with persons.*

In fact, of course, it was not only the female sex who engaged in this competitive shopping. Well-to-do men spent heavily on horses, carriages, clothes, paintings, watches, plate, wigs, books and other luxury objects without incurring the same odium. Besides, much female expenditure was of a vicarious kind, designed to bolster the husband's position: as a Jacobean moralist remarked, 'there cometh credit and praise to the man by the comely apparel of his wife'.

Nevertheless, women spent more time in shops because they were usually responsible for provisioning the household; and middle-class housewives were coming to think of houses as places in which goods were displayed. The wives of better-off farmers were notoriously house-proud, keeping their floors spotless, and polishing and scouring their pewter dishes until they shone. More goods meant more cooking, more washing up and more housework. In 18th-century London, even modest rented rooms had copper kettles, walnut-framed looking-glasses, curtains, and white cotton counterpanes.

Lower down the social scale, among the working poor, the new goods had little initial impact. In the absence of probate inventories for the poor, it is hard to generalise, but it is clear that furnishings were sparse and over half of the domestic budget went on food. The emphasis was more on immediate consumption than on enduring possessions; though, by the later 18th century, cotton and linen, pewter, pottery, tea sets, and decorative household items would reach even labourers' cottages. Carpets and curtains arrived rather later. 'Best' clothes had always been important.

An early 18th-century observer thought that 'the poorest labourer's wife in the parish' would half-starve herself and her husband in order to buy a second-hand gown and petticoat, rather than 'a strong wholesome frieze', because it was more 'genteel'. Even when undernourished and poorly housed, the lower classes were prepared to devote some of their limited resources to goods which boosted their self-esteem and helped them to create social relationships with others.

For the consumption of goods was, as it remains, as much conformist in spirit as competitive. Most people bought commodities out of a desire to keep in line with the accepted standards of their own peer group rather than to emulate those of the one above: similarity in living styles was an important source of social cohesion; and anxiety to do the right thing was more common than the urge to stand out. As Josiah Wedgwood remarked: 'Few ladies, you know, dare venture at anything out of the common style 'till authoris'd by their betters – by the ladies of superior spirit who set the ton.'

The debate about 'luxury' dragged on throughout the 18th century. But the essential economic case had been made by 1700. Vanity and social emulation were indispensable preconditions for trade and employment. Through their 'luxury', the rich contributed to the maintenance of the poor. Consumption was the object of the economic process. As the political writer Edward Forset had urged as early as 1606, it was the sovereign's duty 'to cherish in the subjects an appetite of acquiring of commodities'. The same view was expressed by the Jacobean supporters of an English silk industry, who pointed to the benefits which would redound 'to all sorts of labouring people as to others'.

It was often reiterated. In 1709 Mandeville jocularly proposed a reverse sumptuary law, compelling everyone to buy new clothes every month, purchase new furniture every year, and eat four meals a day – so little did he think of 'the pernicious tenets of the Catos, the Senecas, and other moralmongers that extolled content and frugality, and preach'd against gluttony, drunkenness and the rest of the supporters of the commonwealth'.

This attitude eroded the old distinction between desirable 'necessities' and reprehensible 'luxuries'. For those whose desires were infinite, luxuries now became necessities; as Lord Halifax sardonically observed, 'we call all ''necessary'' that we have a mind to'. So-called 'artificial' wants soon came to seem natural. Adam Smith would rule that necessities were not just those goods which were indispensable for the support of life, but 'whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without'. By relating the dividing line to prevailing conceptions of decency, he accepted that it was a shifting boundary.

For standards constantly changed; and, as Mandeville had observed, one could not tell what words like ‘decency’ and ‘conveniency’ meant until one knew the quality of the person using them; what the poor saw as intolerable luxury was regarded by the gentry merely as ‘decency’. In this way the values of civility, respectability, refinement and politeness were invoked to legitimise the unceasing acquisition of goods.

Above all, goods were welcomed because, in Bishop Sprat’s words, they were necessary helps to felicity, bringing ‘pleasure’ and ‘greater delight’. At the end of the 16th century, William Perkins had allowed that God’s temporal blessings could be used ‘for our honest delight’, and his fellow Puritans John Dod and Robert Cleaver agreed that possessions could be ‘ornaments and delights’. In the 1690s economic writers laid increasing stress on the ‘delight’ which goods could afford; and in the 18th century there were many references to the ‘happiness’ they generated. The craving for possessions was sanctioned by a hedonistic strain which became increasingly visible in the moral thought of the Hanoverian age.

What we see during the 17th and 18th centuries is the gradual emergence of a new ideology, accepting the pursuit of consumer goods as a valid object of human endeavour and recognising that no limit could, or should, be put to it. Consumption was justified in terms of the opportunities it brought for human fulfilment. The growth of a consumer market, unrestricted by the requirements of social hierarchy, offered increasing possibilities for comfort, enjoyment and self-realisation. Poverty was no longer to be regarded as a holy state; and there was no need to feel guilt about envying the rich; one should try to emulate them. Or so the advocates of *laissez-faire* commerce would argue. Goods were prized, for themselves, for the esteem they brought with them, for the social relationships they made possible. To interfere with the process of acquisition by sumptuary laws was what Adam Smith would call ‘the highest impertinence and presumption’; it threatened liberty and personal happiness. The labourer had the right ‘to spend his own money himself and lay out the produce of his labour his own way’. The sovereignty of consumer choice triumphed over the notion that consumption should be regulated to fit social status; and the distribution of goods was left to the working of the market. No one yet foresaw that monopolistic capitalism might one day do as much to restrict choice as to enlarge it.

Of course, economic circumstances limited the ability of many to take advantage of the new freedom. In the later 17th century, a quarter of the population endured some form of poverty and a seventh were in or near destitution. But even those who could afford to buy more commodities did not necessarily rush to do so. Though consumption was no longer subject to state regulation, it was still constrained by social and moral pressures. The classical, humanist model, with its prescription that individuals should pursue rugged virtue and civic responsibility rather than luxurious self-interest, remained influential.

In the countryside many Tudor and Stuart yeomen farmers were hostile to new luxuries, though most of them eventually succumbed to the attraction of larger, lighter and better furnished houses. In the towns, there was a good deal of middle-class inhibition about following a luxurious lifestyle. When he was Lord Chief Justice, Sir Matthew Hale chose to live in a very small house at Acton, inferior to the dwellings of many neighbouring farmers, and his habit was ‘to be short and sparing at meals’, that he might be ‘the fitter for business’; ‘in his furniture and the service of table and way of living, he liked the old plainness’.

The Dissenting clergyman Philip Henry (1631–96) ‘steered by the principle that a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of things that he possesseth’. The great Turkey merchant Sir William Jolliffe claimed in 1746 that he had never bought a book or a picture in his life. Such independent spirits asserted their individuality by perversely not consuming, rather like a modern middle-class family extolling the virtues of ‘good plain cooking’ or boasting that it does not possess a television set. Social competition can take many different forms.

Further Reading

Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (OUP, 2005); Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (eds.), *Luxury in the 18th Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (Palgrave, 2003); Linda Levy *Peck, Consuming Splendor: Society and Culture in 17th-Century England* (CUP, 2005); John Styles and Amanda Vickery (eds.), *Gender, Taste and Material Culture in Britain and North America* (Yale, 2006); Linda Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660-1760* (Routledge, 1996).